

From my Bookshelf



BY SANJEEV CHOPRA

Biographies of institutions are usually hagiographic accounts of the founders- and only talk about the excellent work done by them in their chosen mandate: communities, professions, nations, humanity, world peace. So on and so forth. The saving grace of the book on Sapru House is that it is edited by TCA Raghavan, the current Director General of Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) Raghavan is also a noted historian, as well as a columnist of repute and one who has made immense contribution to the field of scholarship, as well as diplomacy. Besides, he has been a panellist at Valley of Words (VoW), and at several discussions at the LBS National Academy of Administration. But even then, it was with some with some trepidation that I opened this book Sapru House: A story of Institution Building in World Affairs. But my fears were unfounded!

For those of us who were enrolled with the School of International Studies at JNU, there is that sense of nostalgia about Sapru House. Many of us took the special bus from JNU to Sapru House and its collection of well stocked books on world affairs. In 1982, I was enrolled for my M Phil under Prof Matin Zuberi, a distinguished gentleman of the old-world charm, and he would give me a reading list, of which some journals were available in the IDSA library. But one could sense that there was something wrong with the institution, especially as towards the evening all kinds of sundry characters would start pouring into the lawns – giving a very odd feel to the place. So, in those days – there were two eco -systems in place – one from 9 am to about 5 pm – which was quite academic and charming, and then it was taken over by those who gave both Punjabi and theatre a bad name – the auditorium featured some raucous and ribald plays which were totally out of sync with the gravitas of the library.

This book is therefore the story of institutional building, institutional decline, and the institutional resurrection. Let me devote one paragraph to each of these aspects.

Building the Institution: The initiative to establish the institution was taken by two very distinguished stalwarts of the freedom movement – Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru and HN Kunzru. Sapru was a member of the Imperial

Legislative Council and Kunzru was the head of the Servants of People Society founded by Gopal Krishna Gokhale. They were keen that an Indian viewpoint and perspective should be made available to the world – for till then the foreign policy of British India did not have any institutional mechanism for consultation with stakeholders from India. True, there was an Indian Institute of International Affairs – but it was virtually under official control, and hardly any Indian scholar or professor was associated with it.

The ICWA was different. Right from its first meeting, it sought out members from across the country and professions. The first meeting, held on November 21, 1943 in the premises of the FICCI, and in addition to Sapru and Kunzru – Dr MR Jayakar, Dr Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, Ms Renuka Ray, Mr Arthur Moore, Mr Frank Anthony, Mr P N Sapru, Rao Bahadur Shivraj and Dr PS Lokanathan were also present. Dr Lokanathan was a distinguished economist, and he was asked to become the Honorary Secretary. Kunzru said in a statement ‘the organization would not be a party organization. It would be open to all, irrespective of race, colour and creed. He reiterated that the organization would not be a propaganda agency and its main object would be to study international problems and suggest their application to Indian conditions. The body would not be under official patronage, though there was no bar on officials joining it’. By 1944, it was a registered society, though for the first three years, it led a peripatetic existence– its executive committee met at eight different locations-7, Barakhamba Road, 28 Feroze Shah Road, 63/2 Daryaganj, 4, Hardinge Avenue, Travancore House, Canning Road, US Theatre Communication Building, and the Kashi House at Connaught Place.

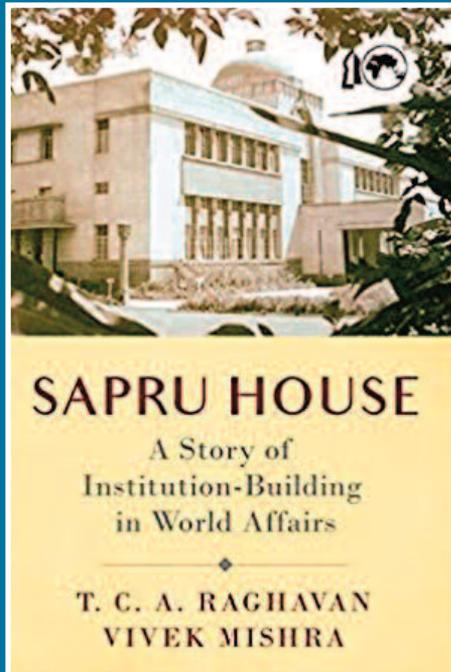
But more than the building, it was the institutional networks that ICWA built which merit our acknowledgement. During this period, it got consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of UN, Chinese Peoples’ Institute on Foreign Affairs, Institute of Pacific Relations (US), Institute of Common wealth Studies, London, the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, the Carnegie corporation, New York, and the International Institute of Differing Civilizations at Brussels. ICWA then took on the task of organizing the Asian Relations Conference – which was attended by twenty-eight countries – from Afghanistan to Vietnam and was in many ways the precursor to the Non-Aligned movement. It certainly ensured that Asian nations had the option of not joining one of the two blocs in the Cold War. It is also important to note that although the Muslim League and Jinnah wrote to the Muslim countries to boycott the confer-

ence organized by an outfit of the Hindu Congress – the appeal did not make any impact – Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Malaysia -to name but a few participated with full vigour. On the side-lines of the Conference, an exhibition on arts and crafts, science and technology and archaeology were also organized.

The organization grew from strength to strength and ICWA also established the Indian School of International Studies (ISIS) (the precursor to JNU). While Delhi University wanted that ISIS should be in the North campus, Dr Appadurai convinced Mr Nehru that ‘as the staff and students have much to do with MEA and foreign missions, it was best that ISIS should continue to be at Sapru House’. However, by the early seventies, the turf wars had begun, and politically aligned groups started making their inroads, which reached the crescendo in 1976 when Swaran Singh became the President of the organization after Kunzru relinquished his position because of poor health. Kunzru was the only person known to have refused the Bharat Ratna, as he had opposed the ‘principle’ in the Constituent Assembly debates.

Institutional capture:

This is best described by the Times of India report of 6th September 1976 ‘In Delhi, lawyers, traders, public relations officers of industrial houses, university teachers and political workers were busy catching the eye of the voter for their candidates. The walls of the Sapru House headquarters of ICWA were plastered with posters. Three distinct rival groups – led by Yashpal Kapur, Hansraj Gupta 9 ex-mayor of Delhi) and Dr Bharat Ram, the helmsman of the DCM group -put up rival teams, and the main objective seems to be the ‘capture of the Sapru House, which had now become ‘prime property in the prime location of new Delhi. As KS Bajpai recalls ‘the place had literally become a cesspool, rented out for weddings and without any involvement what so ever in international affairs. there was a clear case for making it into something like a national trust.’ The Hindustan Times reported ‘In the years immediately after independence, the ICWA provided a forum for visiting dignitaries like Ho Chi Minh, Chester Bowles, Dag Hammarskjold and Arnold Toynbee. Today it



is better known for bawdy tehari parading in the name of Punjabi culture, kabaddi matches organized by petty traders, lavish wedding parties and various suspect activities. The matter came up in the Rajya Sabha where Kamal Morarka said ‘The President of ICWA, Mr Harcharan Singh Josh is known to me. He is a friend of mine. I have known him, Sir, in all humility and submit as a very enthusiastic activist, (sic) but not as an erudite scholar. Sir, there is a difference between the two things.

Institutional Resurrection:

Even though efforts to end the institutional capture were started in the eighties, real push came when ex civil servant Jagmohan was appointed the Urban Affairs Minister in 1999, and responsible for all land use in New Delhi. He pulled the relevant strings, and a Presidential ordinance was issued in September 2000, declaring it to be an institution of national importance. The MEA took charge, and CPWD was pressed into action to repair and renovate the premises and the library. Steps were taken to revive the publications: India Quarterly and Foreign Affairs Report. The ordinance was challenged by Mr Josh in both the High Court and the Supreme Court, but finally after three back-to-back ordinances –

the ICWA Act was passed by both houses of Parliament in September 2001, and in these last two decades, the Vice President of India has headed an immensely powerful, bi-partisan committee of distinguished parliamentarians, ministers from key departments, stake holders from industry and commerce and institutions like ICCR, IDSA, ICSSR et al.

What does the future hold for ICWA? As Raghavan and Mishra point out ‘ICWA’ current and future role has cannot be based on its past laurels alone. As there are enough think tanks on foreign policy issues in the metro cities, ICWA must reach out to the state capitals and beyond, its publications must reach a wider audience through Hindi and other national languages. ICWA must address new issues like climate change, artificial intelligence, big data, and crypto currency. They hit the nail on the head for institutions must evolve and keep ahead of the trends to remain relevant and this is truer for institutions which have the mandate to nurture academic excellence and foresight.